

Chapter 5

Reading Scepticism Historically. Scepticism, Acatalepsia and the Fall of Adam in Francis Bacon

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Abstract The first part of this paper will provide a reconstruction of Francis Bacon's interpretation of Academic scepticism, Pyrrhonism, and Dogmatism, and its sources throughout his large *corpus*. It shall also analyze Bacon's approach against the background of his intellectual milieu, looking particularly at Renaissance readings of scepticism as developed by Guillaume Salluste du Bartas, Pierre de la Primaudaye, Fulke Greville, and John Davies. It shall show that although Bacon made more references to Academic than to Pyrrhonian Scepticism, like most of his contemporaries, he often misrepresented and mixed the doctrinal components of both currents. The second part of the paper shall offer a complete chronological survey of Bacon's assessment of scepticism throughout his writings. Following the lead of previous studies by other scholars, I shall support the view that, while he approved of the state of doubt and the suspension of judgment as a provisional necessary stage in the pursuit of knowledge, he rejected the notion of acatalepsia. To this received reading, I shall add the suggestion that Bacon's criticism of acatalepsia ultimately depends on his view of the historical conditions that surround human nature. I deal with this last point in the third part of the paper, where I shall argue that Bacon's evaluation of scepticism relied on his adoption of a Protestant and Augustinian view of human nature that informed his overall interpretation of the history of humanity and nature, including the sceptical schools.

The following abbreviations will be used to for the individual works of Bacon: ADV (*The Advancement of Learning*), Colors (*Colors of good and evil*), CNR (*Cogitationes de natura rerum*), CV (*Cogitata et visa*), DAU (*De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*), DO (*Distributio operis*), DSV (*De sapientia veterum*), HVM (*Historia vitae et mortis*), NO (*Novum organum*), RPH (*Redargutio philosophiarum*), SI (*Scala intellectus*), TPM (*Temporis partus masculus*), VT (*Valerius terminus*). SEH: *The Works of Francis Bacon*, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis and Douglas Denon Heath, 7 vols., London: Longman, 1859–1864. OFB: *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, eds. Graham Rees and Lisa Jardine, 15 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996–.

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5.1 Introduction

In Francis Bacon's account of the history of philosophy, scepticism played an important role. Modern scepticism had evolved from its Hellenistic roots, and was a central feature of Bacon's philosophical milieu which he could not ignore. In fact Bacon felt himself closer to scepticism than to other ancient or early modern philosophical "sects". Right from the beginning, his philosophical and literary texts recovered doctrines, arguments, and images from different sceptical sources, with which Bacon maintained a long-standing conversation. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of this philosophical dialogue by interpreting Bacon's attitude towards scepticism in the broader context of his historical view of humans and nature.

The first part of this paper will provide a reconstruction throughout Bacon's large *corpus* of his reception of Academic scepticism, Pyrrhonism, and Dogmatism, as well as its sources. It shall also analyze Bacon's approach against the background of his intellectual milieu, looking particularly at Renaissance readings of scepticism as developed by Guillaume Salluste du Bartas, Pierre de la Primaudaye, Fulke Greville, and John Davies. It shall show that although Bacon made more references to Academic than to Pyrrhonian Scepticism, like most of his contemporaries, he often misrepresented and mixed the doctrinal components of both currents. The second part of the paper shall offer a complete chronological survey of Bacon's assessment of scepticism throughout his writings. Following the lead of previous studies by other scholars, I shall support the view that while he approved of the state of doubt and the suspension of judgment as a provisional necessary stage in the pursuit of knowledge, he nonetheless rejected the notion of acatalepsia. To this received reading, I shall add the suggestion that Bacon's criticism of acatalepsia ultimately depends on his view of the historical conditions surrounding human nature. I deal with this last point in the third part of the paper, where I shall argue that Bacon's evaluation of scepticism relied on his adoption of a view of human nature that informed his overall interpretation of human history and nature, including the sceptical schools.

5.2 The Sources and the Reception of Ancient Scepticism¹

The humanist education that Bacon received during his student years at Trinity College of Cambridge University acquainted him with some of the crucial sources of Scepticism circulating in the Renaissance. There is ample and direct textual

¹ This survey relies especially on Wolff (1910–1913) I, pp. 294–301, and Hamlin (2005) pp. 54–56, pp. 83–90.

evidence that he read Cicero, Diogenes Laertius,² and Montaigne.³ There is also indirect evidence that he read Augustine's *Contra academicos*⁴ and that he most probably knew Agrippa's *De vanitate*.⁵ As for Sextus Empiricus, there is no conclusive evidence that he had a firsthand knowledge of his texts; however, we may assume that a man of his learning would have been familiar with them.⁶ A number of lesser known and indirect sources of Bacon's reception of scepticism may have been the French Protestants Guillaume Salluste Du Bartas,⁷ Pierre de La Primaudaye, and Philippe du Plessis Mornay,⁸ whose works presented sceptical doctrines and were quite widespread in the English milieu.⁹ On the other hand, it has been pointed out that Bacon's writings show affinities and broad similarities to some major figures of Renaissance and early modern scepticism such as Sanches¹⁰ and Charron,¹¹ which may indicate a familiarity with their works. Finally, we must not forget the circulation of sceptical doctrines in the works of English authors as Fulke Greville and John Davies, who were closely connected to Bacon.¹²

²In CV SEH III 602 and RPH SEH III 570, Bacon mentions these and other authors (such as Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch and Lucretius) as his sources of ancient philosophy.

³For explicit references to Montaigne in Bacon's works, see DAU SEH I 777; Essay "Of truth" OFB XV 8–9. On Bacon and Montaigne see Villey (1913), Hovey (1991), and Boucher (2001).

⁴See note 51.

⁵Bacon describes Agrippa as a vulgar buffon who distorts everything and turns it into a joke (TPM SEH III 536). On Bacon's reception of Agrippa, see Granada (2006) and Eva (2006).

⁶Hamlin (2005) p. 54.

⁷Bacon mentions Du Bartas (1544–1590) in alluding to a passage of his *La Sémaine* (1578) (ii, 222, lines 1–2) in ADV OFB IV 20 and DAU SEH I 449. In addition to the fact that he may have met Du Bartas during his stay in Poitiers in 1577, several external circumstances connect Du Bartas to him. Du Bartas praised Bacon's father, Nicholas, as one of four pillars of the English language along with Thomas More, Philip Sydney and Queen Elizabeth. On the other hand, Anthony Bacon, Francis' brother, had met Du Bartas in France during the 1580s, and apparently sponsored the translation into English of *La Sémaine* and of *La Seconde Sémaine* (1585). One English translation of part of this work published in 1595 (*The First Day of the Worldes Creation*) was dedicated to him, and of the six parts of *The Second Week* that Josuah Sylvester translated and published in 1598, two each were dedicated to Anthony Bacon and to the Earl of Essex. King James admired Du Bartas, who visited him in Edinburgh. *La Sémaine* became enormously popular in Joshua Sylvester's often-reprinted translation. See Du Bartas 1979, vol. 1, pp. 15–16; 96–97; ADV OFB IV note pp. 219–220; Jardine-Stewart (1998) pp. 100–101.

⁸On evidences of Bacon's acquaintance with La Primaudaye (1546–1619) and Mornay (1549–1623), see Jalobeanu (2012) pp. 221–223.

⁹Hamlin (2005) pp. 36–42.

¹⁰Lia Formigari (1988) pp. 4–5 and 11, attributes to Bacon a linguistic scepticism, and argues that his theory of idols is a tribute paid to the sceptical crisis of his age. She indicates some parallels between Bacon and Sanches. Without claiming that there is any evidence of Bacon's acquaintance with Sanches's work, Granada (2006) pp. 99, 101–103, shows that there are evident coincidences in their arguments.

¹¹Jefferson and Maia Neto (2009) argue that there are general affinities at various points between Bacon's stance towards knowledge, and those maintained by Montaigne, Charron and Sanches.

¹²Bacon was personally related to Greville (1554–1628), who was a favorite at the court of Elizabeth I, Earl of Essex's kinsman and member of Philip Sidney's intellectual circle. See Jardine-Stewart (1998) *passim* and introduction to *A letter of advice to Fulke Greville* OFB I 199–205. As

This background indicates that Bacon might have at least a broad idea of ancient scepticism, and that he could differentiate it from Renaissance scepticism. This presumption is supported by his essay “Of truth”, which first appeared in the last edition of the *Essays* published in 1625, and offers a brief comparison of ancient and contemporary scepticism. There, the ancient sceptical sects are characterized by their “delight in giddiness” by considering “a bondage to fix a belief” and by “affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting”. While Bacon notes that those sects were gone, he also recognizes that sceptical attitudes and ideas are still alive in his day: “there remaine certaine discoursing Wits, which are of the same veines”. In keeping the anatomical image, he adds, however, that in the “veines” of contemporary sceptics, there is “not so much Bloud as in those of the Ancients.”¹³ In alluding to this newer, and weaker, manifestation of scepticism, Bacon is probably referring to Montaigne, who is mentioned in the essay. Furthermore, the representatives of these sceptical “wits” might also be Sanches, Agrippa, Charron, Fulke Greville, and John Davies, among others.

Now, to what extent did Bacon understand the different kinds of scepticism?

I agree with Junqueira Smith’s¹⁴ interpretation, according to which Bacon had at least two views of scepticism: a restricted view, and a wide view. The first one is essentially ancient scepticism, and more specifically, the scepticism of the New Academy, and even more particularly, that of Carneades. According to this view, scepticism is identified with acatalepsia and probabilism. On the other side, Bacon’s wider view of scepticism somehow merges the Academic and the Pyrrhonian currents, and associates with them a number of philosophers, both ancient and otherwise, who are said to subscribe to sceptical attitudes and ideas. In this case, Bacon does not seem to be seriously concerned with tracing the theoretical discussions among the supporters of both ancient sceptical schools.¹⁵ Accepting this overall interpretation, I shall go into the details of Bacon’s reception of ancient scepticism.

To begin, it is worth noting Bacon’s staunch and constant opposition to the philosophical current which, from Sextus Empiricus’s famous classification on, was usually named “dogmatism”.¹⁶ Dogmatic philosophers, Bacon points out, “have

for Sir John Davies of Hereford (1569–1626), there remain at least four letters written by Bacon to him (*The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, vol. III, p. 65; vol. IV, pp. 5–6; Davies (1876) vol. 1, p. xl–xlii). In addition, in his *Scourge of Folly*, Davies addressed a sonnet to Bacon. See also M. Kiernan’s note, in *Essays* OFB XV 179, who refers to Baker (1952) pp. 144–54. On the sceptical doctrines in these English authors, see Hamlin (2005) *passim* and Chaudhuri (2006) part III.

¹³ *Essays* OFB XV 7.

¹⁴ Smith (2012) p. 36.

¹⁵ Smith (2012) p. 38. Hamlin (2005) pp. 87–91 also underlines the confusion of Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism in Bacon’s reception of scepticism.

¹⁶ Sextus Empiricus, HP, I, 1. A terminological remark is necessary here. When talking about the philosophical outlook opposed to Scepticism Bacon did not use the word “dogmatic” neither any particular denomination. On the other hand, he called “dogmatists” the “rationalist” philosophers, but he used the term not in the sense coined by Sextus. See for instance NO OFB XI 152–153 (book I, aph. 95).

presumed to make pronouncements about nature as if it were a closed subject, whether they were speaking from simple confidence or from motives of ambition and academical habits, have done very great damage to philosophy and the sciences.”¹⁷ Dogmatism and scepticism are introduced in the *Novum organum* (1620) as two opposite excesses against which the understanding needs to be cautioned. While dogmatism gives assent intemperately to propositions, scepticism refuses them with equal intemperance. Ultimately, both extremes produce one and the same damage to science: they solidify philosophical idols (*idola theatri*) and make it impossible to get rid of them.

In Bacon’s opinion, the vices of dogmatism were the norm, not the exception in his time. He complained that in the university, men “learn nothing [...] but to believe: first to believe that others know that which know not; and after [that] themselves know that which they know not.” Attitudes towards learning such as the “facility to believe, impatience to doubt, temerity to answer, glory to know, doubt to contradict” had thus impeded the genuine match between the mind of man and the nature of things.¹⁸ In the diagnosis provided in *Advancement of Learning* (1605) and *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623), Bacon ascribes to several particular sciences many failures and errors typical of dogmatism.

Beyond the overall presence of dogmatic attitudes in the sciences and in institutions of learning, Bacon accuses three specific philosophical schools of dogmatism: Epicureans, sophists and Aristotelians. One indirect allusion to the dogmatic leanings of Epicureanism occurs in a short literary piece that Bacon wrote in 1595 on occasion of the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth’s accession to the Throne. Inspired by the Epicurean poet Lucretius, a character in this piece says that “the hill of the muses is above tempests, always clear and calm; a hill of godliest discovery, that man can have, being a prospect upon all the errors and wanderings, of the present and former time.”¹⁹ Later on, in the *Advancement* and in the essay “Of truth”, the Lucretian inspiration of these lines becomes explicit, when Bacon paraphrases some lines of *De rerum natura*.²⁰ Lucretius is said to claim that it is “a pleasure incomparable, for the minde of man to bee settled, landed, and fortified in the certaintie of truth”²¹ and from thence “to see the Errours, and Wandrings, and Mists, and Tempests, in the vale below.”²²

Against these statements, which exhibit a total confidence in man’s epistemic capacities, Bacon’s 1595 literary piece opposes characteristic sceptical arguments through the voice of another character:

¹⁷ NO OFB XI 52, Preface. In many cases, I quote Jardine and Silverthorne’s translation of Bacon (2000a), sometimes slightly revising the translation.

¹⁸ Bacon, *In praise of Knowledge*, in *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, vol. 1, p. 125.

¹⁹ Bacon, “Of love and self-love”, in *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, vol. 1, p. 379.

²⁰ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II, 1–10.

²¹ ADV OFB IV 52.

²² Essays OFB XV 8; ADV OFB IV 52. On the argument of “Of Truth” see Derrin (2013) pp. 67–71.

You (...) that pretend to truth and knowledge, how are you assured that you adore not vain chimeras and imaginations? that in your high prospect, when you think men wander up and down, that they stand not indeed still in their place, and it is some cloud between you and them which moveth, or else the dazzling of your own eyes? Have not many which take themselves to be inward counsellors with Nature, proved to be but idle believers, that told us tales which were not such matter?²³

Another association of Epicureanism with dogmatism occurs when Bacon describes the Epicurean Velleius, a character of Cicero's *De natura deorum*,²⁴ as a typical representative of someone who "fears nothing so much as to be doubtful about anything".²⁵ Such a regrettable attitude is highly damaging for the progress of knowledge. Bacon ascribes the very same behavior to Protagoras, Hippias, and "the rest".²⁶ The philosophy of Aristotle and his followers is also considered dogmatic, because they make rash pronouncements and deliver science with "magisterial methods".²⁷ One mark, in particular, of the magisterial method of transmission of knowledge is that teachers want to be believed, and students want to believe uncritically. As a result, both of them prefer "rather present satisfaction, than expectant Enquire, & so rather not to doubt, than not to erre".²⁸ Closely linked to the magisterial method are the "impatience of doubt, and hast to assertion without due and mature suspension of iudgement".²⁹ By the same token, Bacon rejects as dogmatic vices epistemic credulity, which consists in the disposition to accept "things weakly warranted or authorized", and the excessive credit "given unto Authors" (above all to Aristotle), which makes of them a kind of intellectual dictators.³⁰

As for Bacon's treatment of Academic scepticism and Pyrrhonism, it must first be noted that he often alludes to sceptical doctrines, particularly to acatalepsia and suspension of judgment, without explicitly attaching them to any sceptical school.³¹ His rather vague terminology, in keeping with Sextus's,³² sometimes calls the Pyrrhonians "Sceptics" or "Ephectics", in contrast to the Academics. The philosophy of Pyrrho is explicitly mentioned in Valerius Terminus (1603), *Temporis partus masculus* (1603), and *Novum Organum*.³³ In the *Advancement* and in the parallel passage of its widely expanded Latin version, *De augmentis*, Bacon refers to the

²³ Bacon, "Of love and self-love", in *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, ed. Spedding, vol. I, p. 383.

²⁴ Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I viii 18.

²⁵ ADV OFB IV 31. For more mentions of Velleius see TPM SEH III 536; ADV OFB IV 116–117.

²⁶ NO OFB XI 108–109 (book I, aph. 67).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ ADV OFB IV 31; 123.

²⁹ ADV OFB IV 31.

³⁰ ADV OFB IV 27–28.

³¹ ADV OFB IV 28, 31, 91–92; DAU I SEH 562; DO OFB XI 44; SI SEH II 688; NO OFB XI 52, 78, 188.

³² See Sextus Empiricus, HP I 1–2.

³³ VT SEH III 244; TPM SEH III 537–538; NO OFB XI 108–109 (book I, aph. 67).

Pyrrhonians with the name “Sceptics”, as opposed to “Academic” philosophers.³⁴ On all these occasions, Pyrrhonism is presented along with Academic scepticism. In only one case is the philosophy of Pyrrho discussed without reference to the Academy, to refuse one aspect of its ethical approach.³⁵ In contrast to Pyrrhonism, Academic scepticism appears by itself, in *Colors of good and evil* (1597), *De sapientia veterum* (1609), *Redargutio philosophiarum* (1608), *Novum Organum*, and *Historia vitae et mortis* (1623).³⁶

This quantitative survey clearly indicates that Bacon refers to Academicism far more than to Pyrrhonism.³⁷ However, it must be added that Bacon did not provide a consistent and careful representation of the doctrines supported by the Academic school as against those of Pyrrhonism. In fact, he frequently misrepresented the different opinions belonging to each school in merging and confusing them, like many of his contemporaries. Bacon only occasionally established explicit distinctions between the doctrines of both types of scepticism. On one occasion, he claims that only the Academic school professed acatalepsia and made it a central doctrine. In this context, acatalepsia is described as a moderate sceptical notion by which Academics assume that they have something to follow as probable, but nothing to hold as true. In Bacon’s opinion this view is more honest than the “licence to make pronouncements” promoted by the Pyrrhonians. In fact, Bacon adds, the Academics argue that they do not confound the inquiry as “Pyrrho and the Ephectics” do.³⁸ In other passage, Bacon identifies as Pyrrhonian (no mention made of the Academic scepticism) a particular moral view, also ascribed to the Stoic Herillus and to contemporary Anabaptists. According to this view, rejected by Bacon, happiness is achievable “by an absolute exemption of scruples”. That means that in order to obtain happiness, it is necessary not to assume a fixed standard of good and evil. This kind of moral relativism, Bacon argues, was maintained by “the exploded school of Pyrrho and Herillus” (“illam explosam Pyrrhonis et Herillis scholam”).³⁹

More often, Bacon attributes similar views to Pyrrhonism and Academic philosophy, and blurs the doctrinal boundaries that separated them. Thus, in *Valerius terminus*, he depicts “the second school of the Academics and the sect of Pyrrho” as

³⁴ ADV OFB IV 110–111; DAU SEH I 622.

³⁵ DAU SEH I 719.

³⁶ Colors SEH VII 78; DSV SEH VI 672; NO OFB XI 57, Preface; NO OFB XI 118–119 (book 1, aph. 75); RPH SEH III 580; HVM OFB XII 232.

³⁷ Granada (2006) p. 91.

³⁸ NO OFB XI 108–109 (book I, aph. 67): “At noua Academia *Acatalepsiam* dogmatizauit, & ex professo tenuit. Quae licet honestior ratio sit, quam *pronunciandi* licentia, quum ipsi pro se dicant, se minime confundere inquisitionem, vt *Pyrrho* fecit, & *Ephectici*, sed habere quod sequantur vt probabile, licet non habeant quod teneant vt verum”.

³⁹ DAU SEH I 719. The mention of Pyrrhonism does not occur in the parallel passage of the Advancement (ADV OFB IV 138). On the political and moral contexts of this discussion, see Peltonen (1995) p. 142. Hamlin suggests that this passage of DAU may echo Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, V, 85. The moral doctrines of Herillus and Pyrrho are to be found in Cicero, *De finibus*, IV, 15, 40. The association of Pyrrho with Herillus was not unusual in the early modern reception of scepticism. See Hamlin (2005) pp. 31, 77, 87.

“considerers that denied comprehension, as to the disabling of man’s knowledge.”⁴⁰ In other texts, he identifies the outlook of the Academic school with the suspension of judgment,⁴¹ and both Academics and Pyrrhonians are described as supporters of probabilism, since they have denied “any certaintie of Knowledge, or Comprehension, and held opinion that the knowledge of man extended onely to Appearances, and Probabilities”.⁴²

On the other hand, Bacon distinguishes different stages in the sceptical Academy, in pointing out that earlier Academics held acatalepsia “apparently in jest and irony”, and that the “New Academy”⁴³ made acatalepsia a dogma, and openly maintained it”.⁴⁴ This contrast between different moments of the Academy as presented in *Novum organum* becomes more vague in *Advancement* and *De augmentis*. There, we are told that acatalepsia, which was practiced as a form of irony by Socrates, “was not held sincerely” later on by the members of the new Academy. Bacon explains that this is largely because the sceptical “sect” was chosen by those who “excelled in Copie of Speech”, in order to gain glory by speaking loquaciously on either side of a question (“in utramque partem copiose disserendi”). Thus, it comes as little surprise, Bacon continues, that Cicero embraced this “later Academy”.⁴⁵ Despite these remarks about the insincerity of the sceptical claims, however, Bacon concludes that “assuredly many scattered in both Academyes” and much more among the “Sceptics”, “did hold [acatalepsia] in subtiltie, and integritie”.⁴⁶

By the same token, in *Historia vitae et mortis*, Bacon groups “Carneades and the Academicians” with “the rhetoricians and the grammarians”, since all of them exemplified those philosophies which “entertained no deep speculations”, but “calmly discussed all sides of a question” from common sense and vulgar opinions, without further inquiry.⁴⁷ Thus, it seems likely that Bacon links Carneades with the rhetorical connotation that he ascribed to the new Academy. This not only shows

⁴⁰VT SEH III 244. This passage of VT was probably the draft on which Bacon based the account of scepticism offered later in ADV OFB IV 110–111 and DAU SEH I 622.

⁴¹Colors SEH VII 78: “the Academics, which suspended all asseveration”.

⁴²ADV OFB IV 111.

⁴³“Nova Academia” in NO (book 1, aph. 67); DSV SEH VI 672 and DAU SEH I 622; “second Academy” in VT SEH III 244; “later Academy” in ADV OFB IV 111; “recentiore Academia”; “utraque Academia (veteri et nova)” in DAU SEH I 622.

⁴⁴NO OFB XI 108–109 (book I, aph., 67): “At noua Academia *Acatalepsiam* dogmatizauit, & ex professo tenuit.” Apparently an earlier draft of this sentence appears in RPH SEH III 580: “Hinc Schola Academica, quae ex professo *Akatalepsiam* tenuit.” (My emphasis in both quotations). The treatment of scepticism is much briefer in RPH than in NO book I, aph. 67. In RPH, no mention of Pyrrhonism or of the first period of the Academy is made. Remarkably, in the version of the sentence presented in NO, Bacon adds “nova” to “Academia”, likely to stress the contrasts with respect to acatalepsia between the old and new Academy.

⁴⁵ADV OFB IV 110–111; cf. 31.

⁴⁶ADV OFB IV 110–111; 31; DAU SHE I 622. The Latin version of this passage (DAU SEH I 621–622) adds that acatalepsia was adopted “still more among the Sceptics” (“multo magis inter Scepticos”). In the context of this passage in which Bacon makes a major distinction between “Academici (...) et Sceptici”, “Sceptici” seems to intend the Pyrrhonians.

⁴⁷HVM OFB XII 232–233.

once more the Ciceronian heritage of Bacon's view of Academic scepticism, but may also indicate a Renaissance source: Lorenzo Valla, with whose work Bacon was well acquainted since his student years at Cambridge University. Valla considers Cicero the spokesperson of Academic scepticism, and made a connection between dialectic and Academic scepticism. Starting from this reading of Cicero, in the method of discoursing "in utramque partem" ("on both sides of a question"), Valla finds a strong link which joins Academic scepticism with Peripatetic dialectic.⁴⁸

As for the historical development and circumstances of the emergence of the various ancient sceptical schools, Bacon's narrative vaguely distinguishes three currents: on the one hand, two phases of the Academy, and on the other hand, Pyrrhonism. Though imprecisely, he was more concerned with giving an account of the different stages of the Academy. His narrative explains the emergence of scepticism as motivated by various circumstances: the "dislike of the ancient Sophists", the "habit of vacillation" or "a kind of surfeit of learning".⁴⁹ More specifically, Bacon identified the philosophical currents targeted by the old Platonic Academy. The old academy introduced acatalepsia, Bacon argues, "from resentment against the old Sophists."⁵⁰ On this point of view, scepticism emerged as a reaction against the sophists in the first stage of the Academy.

5.3 Assessing Scepticism

In this section, I shall trace Bacon's complex assessment of scepticism throughout the chronology of his works. As we shall see, his appraisal did not follow an entirely consistent path. In the early *Colors of good and evil*, a text devoted to rhetorical exercises which was part of his first published philosophical volume, Bacon exposits an argument attributed to Cicero, later paraphrased by Augustine in *Contra academicos*.⁵¹ He tells us that Cicero proved that Academic philosophy was the best one by arguing that all other ancient schools assigned to it the second place. From the fact that both the Stoics and the Epicureans maintained that Academic philosophy was the best position after their own philosophical position, it must be concluded, Bacon argues, that Academic philosophy in fact deserved the first place. According to Bacon, the "color" (or proverb) behind Cicero's claim teaches us that the philosophical position to which all other parties agree is the next best, is in fact the best,

⁴⁸ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting the reference to Valla. On Valla's reading of Academic scepticism, see Jardine (1983). On Bacon's acquaintance with Valla, see Jardine (1974) 7–15.

⁴⁹ NO OFB XI 52–53, Preface.

⁵⁰ NO OFB XI 108–109 (book 1, aph. 67).

⁵¹ Hamlin (2005) p. 54. Augustine, *Contra academicos*, III, 7, 15–16. Augustine's passage is included in Cicero, (1967) p. 460–461, as one of *Academia's fragments "librorum incertorum"* (# 20).

since the assumption of first place is probably due to partiality, but the attribution of second place is the result of true merit.⁵²

Around 1603, Bacon composes a sharp and sarcastic criticism of ancient and contemporary philosophies, a manuscript entitled *Temporis partus masculus*. In this unpublished writing, the philosophy of “Pyrrho and the Academics” receives relatively mild criticism compared with the harsh objections raised against other philosophies. To some extent, it may seem that the sceptics are not taken very seriously. Bacon admits that he is amused by them because they are always vacillating, as if they were speaking from a boat.⁵³ The sceptics, he argues, act like whimsical lovers who, although they constantly injure their lovers, are nevertheless unable to leave them. That is because while “other philosophers follow straight after their idols, these fellows are led round in circles, which is more diverting”.⁵⁴

That same year, in the unpublished *Valerius terminus*, Bacon approves of the “disabling of man’s knowledge” advocated by Academics and Pyrrhonians. He disagrees with them, however, because they blamed the senses, “which admitteth very sparing remedy”, for our epistemic failures. Instead, Bacon continues, they should have blamed the mind, “which admitteth a perfect remedy”.⁵⁵ Similar agreements and discrepancies with the sceptical approach appeared later in the *Advancement* and *De augmentis*.⁵⁶ While the framework of Bacon’s general assessment in these three works remains the same, *De augmentis* was more specific about the remedies and aids designed to address the faults of the senses. Bacon’s next examination of philosophical traditions is in *Redargutio philosophiarum*, a far more moderate text, written around 1608. Scepticism, and more specifically the Academy, is briefly considered in entirely negative terms as originating from an objectionable philosophical attitude. The very same authors who have assumed a kind of dictatorship in the sciences, and who make pronouncements about things with so much confidence, often take to complaining about the subtlety of nature, the obscurity of objects, the weakness of human understanding, and similar things. Bacon judges that behind this insincere “confession”⁵⁷ lies a false modesty that, far from admitting weakness, declares that it is impossible to know what the current state of learning is unable to obtain.⁵⁸ This is, Bacon concludes, the source from which the Academic school

⁵² Colors SEH VII 78.

⁵³ This depiction reminds us of Du Bartas’s characterization of Pyrrho as dominated by “wavering fantasies” which make him ridiculous. Du Bartas (1979), vol. I, 283.

⁵⁴ TPM SEH III 537–538. I quote the English translation from Farrington (1964), p. 71.

⁵⁵ This is probably the first draft of passages in ADV and DAU SEH I 621.

⁵⁶ ADV OFB IV 111; DAU SEH I 622.

⁵⁷ Bacon said that this is a mere “professio”. This word could be linked to his statement according to which Academics held acatalepsia “ex professo” in NO OFB XI 108–109 (book I, aph. 67) and RPH SEH III 580.

⁵⁸ RPH SEH III 579–580. Cf. the slightly modified version of this text in Preface to the *Instauratio Magna* in OFB XI 14.

stemmed. Consequently, by overtly maintaining acatalepsia, this school “condemned men to everlasting darkness”.⁵⁹

Scala intellectus, an unpublished draft written before 1612 and intended as an introduction to part four of *Instauratio Magna*, makes scepticism a central topic. Referring to scepticism without naming it, Bacon largely approves the sceptical claims about “the varying nature of the senses, the weakness of human judgment, and the propriety of withholding assent”.⁶⁰ Even though this text exhibits Bacon’s most sympathetic appraisal of scepticism, it also introduces for the first time the criticism that was later fully developed in the *Novum organum*: (1) we agree with the sceptical path as far as its initial positions are concerned, but (2) we dissent largely with respect to their ends. Where the sceptics stated the incompetence of epistemic faculties absolutely and without qualification (*simpliciter*), already at this early stage Bacon maintained that such incompetence occurs only under certain circumstances. Moreover, he contends that to counter sceptical desperation, new remedies and corrections have to be prescribed.⁶¹

The definitive pronouncement of Bacon’s assessment of scepticism appears in *Novum organum*. Aphorism 37 of book 1 assembles and epitomizes different arguments early scattered throughout several works:

In its initial positions our way agrees to some extent with the method of the supporters of acatalapesia, but in the end our ways are far apart and strongly opposed. They assert that nothing can be known absolutely [*simpliciter*]; but we say that not much can be known in nature by the way which is now in use. They thereupon proceed to destroy the authority of sense and intellect; but we devise and provide assistance to them.⁶²

Bacon’s “initial” agreement with scepticism embraces two main points: on the one hand, the critical arguments concerning the possibility of knowledge, and on the other hand, the suspension of judgment.⁶³ Certainly, Bacon not only agreed with the sceptical arguments which reveal the uncertainty of knowledge and the lack of

⁵⁹ RPH SEH III 580.

⁶⁰ SI SEH II 688: “Veruntamen negare plane non possumus, quin si qua nobis cum antiquis intercedat societas, ea cum hoc genere philosophiae maxime conjuncta sit; cum multa ab illis de sensuum variationibus et iudicii humani infirmitate et de cohibendo et sustinendo assensu prudenter dicta et animadversa probemus; quibus etiam in numera alia, quae eodem pertinent, adungere possemus; adeo ut inter nos et illos hoc tantum intersit, quod illi nil vere sciri posse prorsus, nos nil vere sciri posse ea qua adhuc gens humana ingressa est via, statuamus.”

⁶¹ SI SEH II 688: “Sed tamen rursus in hac de qua diximus societate facile quis perspexerit, nos earum illos viros initiis opinionum conjunctos, exitu in immensum divisos esse. Etsi enim primo non multum dissentire videamur, quod illis incompetentiam humani intellectus simpliciter, nos sub modo asseramus”

⁶² NO OFB XI 78 (book I, aph. 37): “Ratio eorum, qui *Acatalepsiam* tenuerunt, & via nostra initiis suis quodammodo consentiunt; exitu immensum disiunguntur et opponuntur. Illi enim nihil sciri posse simpliciter asserunt; Nos, non multum sciri posse in Natura, ea, quae nunc in vsu est, via: Verum illi exinde auctoritatem sensus & intellectus destruunt; Nos auxilia ijsdem excogitamus & subministramus.”

⁶³ The sense in which Bacon claimed to agree with the sceptics in its initial positions has been very well analyzed by Smith (2012), and I rely on his study.

comprehension, he also incorporated them in his own *pars destruens*.⁶⁴ Furthermore, he endorsed the sceptical suspension of judgment, and integrated it into his program as a necessary step towards certain knowledge. The Baconian methodology thus attacks the “impatience of doubt, and hast to assertion without due and mature suspension of iudgement”, for “if a man will begin with certainties, hee shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to beginne with doubts, he shall end in certainties”.⁶⁵

The high value that Bacon’s methodological program attributed to doubt is particularly evinced by his suggestion to make a “Kalendar of Doubts”, citing the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata* as a good example. Such an accurate exposition of “particular doubts”, Bacon argues, serves two excellent ends. On the one hand, it protects philosophy against errors, since that which is not proved is not asserted, but rather results in a suspension of judgment. On the other hand, it leads the mind to pay attention to that which is doubted, which otherwise would remain unnoticed. Of course, Bacon warns that doubts must be carefully restrained and employed only for the sake of the pursuit of knowledge. If once a doubt has been admitted, men are only concerned with keeping it and discoursing “in utramque partem”, then the doubt has lost its genuine goal.⁶⁶ In this way, and like many contemporary English authors, Bacon never adopted the sceptical doubt and the provisional suspension of judgment as a permanent state of mind, but as heuristic devices, and necessary tools for the discovery of truth.⁶⁷

Thus, it seems evident that Bacon’s main disagreement with the final conclusion of scepticism concerns acatalepsia. Before analyzing his account, a very brief excursus is necessary. Bacon’s reading relies on the Ciceronian sense of acatalepsia. Cicero ascribed to the Stoics the use of the Greek term *katalepsis*, which he rendered as *comprehensio*.⁶⁸ According to Cicero, the opponents of the Academics argued that there is no need to define what comprehension means, because there is nothing clearer than evidentness (*evidentia*, *perspicuitas*, Latin words for the Greek *energeia*). In contrast, the defenders of the new Academy held the opposite view, and denied that comprehension indeed exists. To convey this later view, Cicero introduced for the first time in the Latin tongue the Greek expression *akatalepton* and glossed it as the denial that anything can be grasped.⁶⁹

In Bacon’s texts, acatalepsia is described as a denial of comprehension (an obvious translation of the Ciceronian *comprehensio*, in VT, ADV, and DAU) and certain knowledge (in ADV and DAU). It is identified with the proposition that nothing can

⁶⁴ See Granada (2006), Eva (2011), Smith (2012).

⁶⁵ ADV OFB IV 31.

⁶⁶ ADV OFB IV 91; DAU SEH I 562. The reference to the sceptical tenets is more explicit in the DAU Latin version: “de eo suspenditur iudicium”; “statim defensores in utramque partem suscitabit”. The function that Bacon attributes to *Problemata*, and this subtle association of it with sceptical techniques, by no means appear to have been typical of the Renaissance reception of this extremely popular literary genre. See Blair (1999).

⁶⁷ Hamlin (2005) p. 142.

⁶⁸ Translated as “mental grasp” in Cicero (1967).

⁶⁹ Cicero, *Academica*, II.vi.17–18.

be known absolutely (*simpliciter*) (in NO and SI).⁷⁰ What Bacon rejects from the sceptical outlook was precisely this very notion of acatalepsia, not because it entails that nothing can be known, but because it entails that nothing can be known *absolutely*. For that reason, he argued that those who made acatalepsia a dogma “condemned men to everlasting darkness”.⁷¹ It is true, Bacon claims, that the human mind is like an uneven mirror which merges its own nature with the nature of things, distorting and corrupting it.⁷² But Bacon insists on the fact that this acknowledgment of the imperfect condition of the epistemic faculties does not entail the sceptical acatalepsia.⁷³ Furthermore, not even the suspension of judgment brings about acatalepsia:

One should not be frightened of such a suspension of judgement in a doctrine which does not assert that nothing can be known absolutely [*simpliciter*], but that nothing can be known except in a certain order and by a certain method; and meanwhile it has set up some degrees of certainty for use and comfort until the mind reaches its goal of explanation of causes.⁷⁴

Again, Bacon recognized that in arguing that humans should avoid making pronouncements, and should lay down fixed principles until arriving at the most general principles, he would maintain a suspension of judgment. But he did not accept that this procedure amounted to acatalepsia:

But what we have in mind and propose is not Acatalepsia but Eucatalepsia: for we do not detract from the senses, but assist them; we do not discredit the understanding, but regulate it. And it is better to know as much as we need to know, and yet think that we do not know everything, than to think that we know everything, and yet know none of the things which we need to know.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *Akatalepsia* has been translated variously by modern scholarship. Charles Schmitt has rendered it as “the failure to grasp”; Schmitt (1972) p. 71. Annas and Barnes in their translation of Sextus Empiricus and *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (Bett 2010) have rendered it as “inapprehensibility”. As for the translators of Bacon, Brian Vickers glosses *akatalepsia* as a term used by sceptics “to argue that reality is ‘non-apprehensible’” (Bacon (2002) p. 636). The Spedding translation have rendered *akatalepsia* as “to comprehend anything” (SEH IV 39, preface to NO) or “a denial of the capacity of the mind to comprehend truth” (SEH IV 111). Jardine and Silverthorne have opted to render the Latin word as “lack of conviction”, Bacon (2000a) p. 40, whereas *The Oxford Francis Bacon* inserted a gloss into Bacon’s Latin which defines *akatalepsia* as the notion “that knowledge is unattainable”.

⁷¹ NO OFB XI 118–119 (book I, aph. 75): “Hinc schola Academiae nouae, quae *Acatalepsiam* ex professo tenuit, & homines ad sempiternas tenebras damnauit”. Cf. RPH SEH III 580: “Hinc Schola Academica, quae ex professo *Acatalepsiam* tenuit, et homines ad sempiternas tenebras damnauit.”

⁷² DO OFB XI 34.

⁷³ CV SEH III 607. Cf. NO OFB XI 78–80 (book I, aph. 41).

⁷⁴ DO OFB XI 44: “Istam vero Iudicii suspensionem non est quod exhorreat quispiam in Doctrina, quae non simpliciter nil sciri posse, sed nil nisi certo ordine & certa via sciri posse asserit.”

⁷⁵ NO OFB XI 188–190 (book I, aph. 126): “Occurret & illud: nos, propter inhibitionem quandam prouidentiam, & principia certa ponendi, donec per medios gradus ad Generalissima rite peruentum sit; Suspensionem quandam iudicij tueri, atque ad *Acatalepsiam* rem deducere. Nos vero non *Acatalepsiam*, sed *Eucatalepsiam* meditatur et proponimus: Sensui enim non derogamus, sed ministramus; & Intellectum non contemnimus, sed regimus. Atque melius est scire quantum opus sit, & tamen nos non penitus scire putare, quam penitus scire nos putare, & tamen nil eorum quae Opus est scire”.

At this point, it raises the question of what the ultimate foundation for Bacon's rejection of acatalepsia actually is. I shall suggest that Bacon's dismissal of acatalepsia derives from his historical approach to humankind and to nature, which imbues his entire philosophy. In this approach, the story of the Fall of Adam plays a central role.

5.4 The Genealogy of Scepticism and the Fall of Adam

In *Academica*, Cicero tells us that the obscurity of things led Socrates, his predecessors Democritus, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and "almost all the old philosophers" to a confession of ignorance later embraced by Arcesilaus.⁷⁶ This genealogical narrative of scepticism was very influential in the Renaissance, to the extent that many authors conjoined Socratic ignorance with Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism.⁷⁷ One representative instance of this attitude is found in Montaigne, who thought that Pyrrhonism ultimately derived from pre-Socratic views.⁷⁸ Other Renaissance thinkers extended this genealogy even further by connecting the pre-Socratic and Socratic origins of sceptical ideas to the theological doctrine of original sin.⁷⁹ For instance, in *La Sémaine* (1578; 1585), Du Bartas adopts the Ciceronian genealogy in presenting the Socratic confession of ignorance along with Democritus's complain about the obscurity of things. But unlike Montaigne, he judged that Pyrrho was wrong because he was ignorant of Adam's Fall. The following verses express how deeply human learning was changed as a consequence of the Fall:

Mankind was then a thousand fold more wise
Then now, blind error had not bleart his eyes,
With mists which mak th'*Athenian sage* suppose
That *nought he knowes, save this, that nought he knows.*
That even light Pyrrhons wavering fantasies
Reave him the skill his un-skill to agnize.
And th'*Abderite*, within a well obscure,
As deep as darke, the truth of things immature.⁸⁰

In Du Bartas's opinion, Pyrrho was ignorant of his own ignorance: he was not aware that the human condition of which he, Democritus, and Socrates complained

⁷⁶ Cicero, *Academica*, I.xvii.44. The Socratic inspiration of Arcesilaus has been established on a solid historical textual basis by Thorsrud (2010) pp. 58–62 and by Longo (2011) pp. 365–367. See also Bett (2006).

⁷⁷ See Schmitt (1972) p. 27; 51; 73; 85; Hamlin (2005) p. 140.

⁷⁸ Hovey (1991) pp. 72–73.

⁷⁹ Several studies have noted the close association of the doctrine of original sin with scepticism in the Renaissance and the early modern periods. See Hoopes (1951); Chaudhuri (2006) 45 ss; Hamlin (2005) 120–121; Harrison (2007) 7; 11; Maia Neto (2009).

⁸⁰ Du Bartas (1979) vol I, 323–324 (II.1 Eden, 261–8). I quote from the English translation by Josuah Sylvester.

was not the original condition of humankind. In other words, the ancient philosophers were not aware that the deficiencies in human knowledge were effects of a central episode of human history. Such a reading of the Fall echoes the Protestant doctrine of original sin characteristic of Augustinian anthropology. Despite the fact that Augustine and ancient sceptics agreed in questioning the possibility of human knowledge, they disagreed considerably in the causes and responses to this epistemic fallibility. For ancient sceptics, the epistemic limitations were an essential and irreversible quality of human nature. In contrast, on the Augustinian account, the Fall of Adam is the main explanation of the fallen state of human learning.⁸¹ Later on, Calvin agreed with Augustine that man's natural gifts (intellect and will) were partially corrupted by original sin, while supernatural gifts were entirely extinguished.⁸² His view of the human postlapsarian nature tried to differentiate itself from the more optimistic approach advocated by Aquinas and Scholastic authors, who emphasized that the Fall entailed only the loss of the supernatural gifts responsible for the knowledge of divine matters.⁸³

Renaissance responses to the fallen epistemic nature of man were diverse. Some were more optimistic than others. Pierre de la Primaudaye, for instance, endorsed an optimist approach. After introducing careful definitions of belief, science, opinion, doubt, incredulity and faith,⁸⁴ he condemned dogmatic views and commended the Socratic confession of ignorance as a necessary starting point to the pursuit of knowledge.⁸⁵ General experience, knowledge of principles, and natural judgment are all natural means that provide us with certain knowledge of natural things, whereas divine revelation serves to know divine things. The perfect knowledge of God that man had in his "first estate" was lost as a consequence of sin, and should therefore be restored.⁸⁶ A similar view is advocated by John Davies in his philosophical poem *Nosce te ipsum* (1599). Once again, in Davies we find the Ciceronian conjunction of Socrates's confession of ignorance with Democritus's complain about the obscurity of things:

The wits that diu'd most deepe and soar'd most hie
Seeking Man's pow'rs, haue found his weaknesse such
(...)
For this the wisest of all morall men
Said, '*He knew nought, but that he nought did know*';
And the great mocking-Master mockt not then,
When he said, '*Truth was buried deepe below*'⁸⁷

⁸¹ Harrison (2007) p. 11.

⁸² Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ii. 12.

⁸³ On Luther's and Calvin's views on the epistemic consequences of the Fall of Adam, see Harrison (2007) 54–66; Hoopes (1951) 323–339.

⁸⁴ Primaudaye (1594) pp. 182–185. The French original of the Academie Francaise was published in several parts from 1577 forward. I quote the second part of this work from the English translation by Thomas Bowes published in 1594.

⁸⁵ Primaudaye (1594) pp. 187–188.

⁸⁶ Primaudaye (1594) pp. 190–192.

⁸⁷ Davies (1876) vol. 1, p. 19.

Davies tells us that the “desire to know first made men fools,/and did corrupt the root of all mankind”.⁸⁸ The “heavenly nature of mind” is corrupted in “wit and will”⁸⁹ and the consequences of the Fall were inherited by the entire human race. After the Fall, the mind became “like the eye” which gain “knowledge by degrees”, but does not see its defective condition when contemplating other things.⁹⁰

A more pessimistic approach is found in Fulke Greville’s *Treatie of Human Learning* (c. 1605), written perhaps in response to Bacon’s *Advancement of learning*. It tells us that the deficiencies of human faculties (sense, imagination, memory and understanding) being entailed by original sin, are constant and insuperable.⁹¹ However, dogmatic philosophers commit the mistake of believing that they know with certainty. Greville’s pessimism stresses that probability is all that postlapsarian arts and sciences can obtain, for “to demonstrate they cannot attaine”.⁹² The fallen state of man is irreversible: “So as man’s bankrupt is not free,/By any arts to raise itself againe”.⁹³ This position clearly contrasts with Bacon’s epistemic optimism.

Bacon’s account of the history of philosophy was informed by his view of the history of humankind and nature, in which the Fall of Adam is understood as a unique turning-point. Unlike Davies, he ascribed the Fall not to the pursuit of knowledge in general, but to the pursuit of a knowledge beyond the allowed limits (“the science of the principles of good and evil”).⁹⁴ Unlike Greville, his project of the reform of learning constituted an optimist response to reverse the fallen state of human nature. Such a project relied on the confidence that divine providence legitimized, and would bring about, the success of this undertaking. Bacon believed that in his time, a new era of restoration of learning was about to begin, and referred to himself as its herald.⁹⁵

In keeping with a widespread Renaissance and early modern view which has antecedents in a number of Church Fathers⁹⁶ and in Calvin himself,⁹⁷ Bacon was convinced that the Fall of Adam disrupted the original state of the world, caused the decay of the whole of nature, and changed its laws to the point that man lost the mastery over nature that he enjoyed during the Edenic period. The first and most obvious signal observed in postlapsarian nature has to do with the relation of creatures to man. Whereas before Adam’s sin, creatures obeyed and responded gently to man’s commands, they became wild and disobedient after the Fall.⁹⁸

⁸⁸ Davies (1876) vol. 1, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Davies (1876) vol. 1, p. 24.

⁹⁰ Davies (1876) vol. 1, p. 20.

⁹¹ Greville (1820) stanzas 4–19.

⁹² Greville (1820) stanza 98, pp. 42–43.

⁹³ Greville (1820) stanza 16, p. 12.

⁹⁴ Chaudhuri (2006) p. 76; Manzo (2001) pp. 229–232.

⁹⁵ The relevance of this view in Bacon’s appraisal of scepticism has been noted by Granada (2006) p. 92, and Granada (1982). See also Jefferson and Maia Neto (2009) p. 267.

⁹⁶ Harrison (2007) pp. 180–181.

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xxv. 792–3. Harrison (2007) pp. 60–61.

⁹⁸ VT SEH III 222–223.

Thus, the Fall of Adam dramatically transformed the conditions of nature, and had both ontological and epistemological effects. From an ontological point of view, it brought about a transformation of the entire nature into fallen nature. From an epistemological point of view, the transparency of nature, whose creatures Adam named according to their properties, after the Fall, was gone. As a result, nature became an obscure and difficult labyrinth to the now equally fallen intellectual and corporeal capacities of humankind.⁹⁹ The inductive method was thought to be the *fylum labyrinthi*, the epistemological clue to counter this degradation. Man knows from revelation that creatures were obedient in Paradise; that nature was created *ex nihilo* by God with harmony and beauty; and that by God's design, humankind dominated nature. For this reason, the new science is allowed to entertain the prospect of an ameliorated condition for humankind and the entire nature.

According to Bacon's historical approach, since human learning reached its highest point in the prelapsarian age, traces of the lost Adamic wisdom remained in the immediate postlapsarian time. It was on this basis that Bacon depicted classical mythology as a receptacle of the pristine Adamic wisdom, a wisdom delivered to the very first generations of philosophers.¹⁰⁰ By the same token, pre-Socratic philosophy is consistently seen as the best manifestation of the learning of the long post-Adamic age. In contrast, Bacon judged that the emergence of the Greek philosophical schools or "sects" (above all, the Aristotelian school) initiated a long period of decadence which reached all the way to his own time.

In *Temporis partus masculus*, sceptics were preferred to other philosophers, despite in mild, joking, and vague terms. Later on, in the more moderate *Redargutio philosophiarum*, scepticism was presented in entirely negative terms, although sceptics were not included in any of Bacon's three distinct categories of philosophers in this writing: the sophists (Gorgias, Protagoras, and Hippias), the founders of philosophical schools or sects (Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, and Epicurus), and Bacon's preferred category, the serious searchers for truth (Empedocles, Heraclitus, Democritus, Anaxagoras, and Parmenides).¹⁰¹ By the same period, in the *Advancement of Learning*, which resembles the Ciceronian narrative, Bacon traced the origins of Academic scepticism back to Socrates. As we have seen, he presented Socrates's "ironical doubting of all things" as the antithesis to Epicurean dogmatism. In Socrates, who championed the fight against the sophists, the denial of certain knowledge or comprehension "was supposed to be but a fourme of Irony, *Scientiam dissimulando simulavit*: For hee vsed to disable his knowledge, to the end to inhance his Knowledge".¹⁰²

⁹⁹ For a more detailed exposition of the epistemic consequences of the Fall of Adam in Bacon's account, see Manzo (2001). More recent studies have dealt with the connection between Bacon's narrative of the Fall of human nature and his directions for the "culture of the mind"; see Harrison (2012) and Corneanu (2011) chap. 1.

¹⁰⁰ On Bacon's view of mythology in this regard, see Manzo (2014).

¹⁰¹ RPH SEH III 565–566; 570.

¹⁰² ADV OFB XI 111; DAU SEH I 622. On Socrates and irony see Cicero, *Academica*, II.v.15.

Bacon followed the Ciceronian genealogy even further in connecting the pre-Socratics with sceptical tenets. In *De Sapientia veterum*, a writing devoted to the interpretation of classical myths, he praised pre-Socratic philosophy as the summit of post-Adamic learning. There, he notes that “Empedocles and Democritus, who complain (...) that all things are hidden away from us, that we know nothing, that we discern nothing, that truth is drowned in deep wells,¹⁰³ that the true and the false are strangely joined and twisted together, (for the new Academy carried it a great deal too far), are more to be approved than the school of Aristotle so confident and declamatory”.¹⁰⁴ Bacon suggests here a ranking of ancient philosophers, with primacy of place to Empedocles and Democritus, apparently followed by the Academics, and then finally Aristotle. The pre-Socratics were prone to doubt, but at the same time, they were reasonable about the exact limits of human knowledge.

However, this ranking was altered in the unpublished *Scala intellectus*, where surprisingly, Bacon tells us that “if there be any fellowship between the ancients and ourselves, it is principally as connected” with sceptical philosophy.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Bacon felt himself also associated with those ancient philosophers who were congenial to the sceptical approach. He referred to those who, without being overtly sceptical, shared with the sceptics their way of asking questions and raising objections, and their admission of the obscurity of things. Undoubtedly, Bacon is alluding once more to pre-Socratic philosophers, like Democritus and Empedocles. All of them, sceptics and pre-Socratics, constituted in his opinion the “most profound of the ancient thinkers”.¹⁰⁶

The fullest account of scepticism from an historical comparative perspective occurs in *Novum organum*. Part of the text of Aphorism 71 of Book 1 was apparently developed from some fragments of *Redargutio philosophiarum*. The *Novum*

¹⁰³ Bacon evokes this image frequently throughout his work: DAU SEH I 547; ADV OFB IV 80; *Apothegms* OFB I 259 (n. 263); Letter to Lord Burghley (1592), *The Letters and Life of Francis Bacon* SEH VIII 109; *History of the King Henry the Seventh* OFB VIII 27.

¹⁰⁴ Spedding’s translation, slightly modified (DSV SEH VI 749). The Latin version (DSV SEH VI 672) says: “Empedocles, qui tanquam furens, et Democritus, qui magna cum verecundia, queruntur, omnia abstrusa esse, nihil nos scire, nil cernere, veritatem in profundis puteis inmersam, veris falsa miris modis adjuncta atque intorta esse”. The passage seems to be directly inspired in Cicero, *Academica*, II.v.14: “physici raro admodum, cum haerent aliquot loco, exclamant quasi mente incitati DOUBLEHYPHENEmpedocles quidem ut interdum mihi furere videatur – abstrusa esse omnia, nihil nos sentire, nihil cernere, nihil omnino quale sit posse reperire” and *Academica*, I.xii.44: “ut Democritus, in profundo veritatem esse demersam, opinionibus et institutis omnia teneri, nihil veritati relinqui, deinceps omnia tenebris circumfusa esse dixerunt.” See also Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae*, IX Pyrrho, 72 (Democritus) and 73 (Empedocles).

¹⁰⁵ Wormald (1993) p. 364 held that the presentation of scepticism in *Scala intellectus* is “unusually enthusiastic”. See also Hamlin (2005) p. 254 n. 35.

¹⁰⁶ SI SEH II 688: “Veruntamen negare plane non possumus, quin si qua nobis cum antiquis intercedat societas, ea cum hoc genere philosophiae maxime conjuncta sit; cum multa ab illis de sensuum variationibus et iudicii humani infirmitate et de cohibendo et sustinendo assensu prudenter dicta et animadversa probemus; quibus etiam in numera alia, quae eodem pertinent, adjungere possemus; adeo ut inter nos et illos hoc tantum intersit, quod illi nil vere sciri posse prorsus, nos nil vere sciri posse ea qua adhuc gens humana ingressa est via, statuamus.”

organum introduces significant additions with respect to the situation of Academic scepticism in the context of ancient philosophy. Whereas in *Redargutio philosophiarum*, Carneades is not even named, let alone included in any of the three kinds of philosophers, in *Novum organum* he is attacked for being a successor of Plato:

the wisdom of the Greeks was rhetorical and prone to disputation, a genus inimical to the search for truth. And so the term ‘sophists’, which was rejected by those who wanted to be regarded as philosophers and applied with contempt to the orators – Gorgias, Protagoras, Hippias, Polus – is also applicable to the whole tribe – Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Epicurus Theophrastus and their successors, Chrysippus, Carneades and the rest.¹⁰⁷

Still, Bacon admits that both groups certainly exhibited the differences already noted in *Redargutio philosophiarum*. But now he stressed the fact that all of them embody a rhetorical philosophy that did not search for truth.¹⁰⁸ On many occasions, Bacon depicted scepticism as a “sect”, and he rejected philosophical sects because they were motivated by ambition, by vanity, and by the anxiety to win popular favor. He believed that there is no hope “for the search for truth when it is sidetracked into these trivialities”. On the contrary, “the older Greeks” (Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Leucippus, Democritus, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Philolaus) “did not, so far as we know, open schools, but gave themselves to the search for truth more quietly, more seriously and more simply, that is with less affectation and display”.¹⁰⁹ The supremacy of the pre-Socratics is once again underlined.

The preface of *Novum organum* clearly places scepticism in an intermediate position between pre-Socratic philosophy and dogmatism (as exemplified by the philosophy of Aristotle):

Those who have presumed to make pronouncements about nature as if it were a closed subject, whether they were speaking from simple confidence or from motives of ambition and academical habits, have done very great damage to philosophy and the sciences (...) Those who have gone the opposite way and claimed that nothing at all can be known (...), have certainly supported their positions with arguments which no one should despise. Yet they have not drawn their view from true beginnings, but have been carried away by a kind of enthusiasm and artificial passion, and have gone beyond all measure. The earlier Greeks however (whose writings have perished) took a more judicious stance between the ostentation of pronouncements and the despair of acatalepsia; and though they frequently complained and indignantly deplored the difficulty of investigation and the obscurity of things, (...); thinking it appropriate (it seems) not to argue the point (whether anything can be known), but to try it by experience. And yet they too, relying only on the impulse of the intellect, stuck to no rules, and staked everything on the mind’s endless and aimless activity.¹¹⁰

In keeping with the earlier expositions in *De sapientia veterum* and *Scala intellectus*, this account again links the pre-Socratic philosophy with sceptical components like the complaints about “the difficulty of investigation and the obscurity of things”. The arguments by which the sceptics supported their views are not at all to

¹⁰⁷ NO OFB XI 112 (book I, aph. 71).

¹⁰⁸ The sophistic character of the founders of philosophical schools was also noted in RPH.

¹⁰⁹ NO OFB XI 112 (book I, aph. 71).

¹¹⁰ NO OFB XI 52–53, Preface.

be dismissed. However, Bacon raises objections to their conclusions, for “they have not drawn their view from true beginnings”. Which are the false beginnings of the sceptical view? I would suggest that Bacon is alluding to an implicit, and false, perspective with respect to human nature and the very causes of human fallibility. On Bacon’s opinion, the notion of acatalepsia endorsed by the new Academy assumed that the human condition was essentially unable to reach certain knowledge, and thought that this condition was permanent and insuperable. That is why sceptics said that nothing can be known *simpliciter*. But Bacon precisely rejected the *simpliciter* character of sceptical acatalepsia. He maintained that nothing can be known – not *simpliciter*, but rather *under certain circumstances*, namely the circumstance that man is subject to the consequences of the Fall of Adam, and is not applying an adequate method of inquiry.

5.5 Conclusion

At a theoretical level, and in his own way, Bacon endorsed two main components of the sceptical outlook: the arguments to doubt the validity of truth-claims, and the suspension of judgment. But his similarities to scepticism went no further. He felt that the sceptical criticism has gone too far, and has condemned men to despair and darkness. In his view, the result of the sceptical challenge was incompatible with the hope to recover, at least in part, the wisdom of the Adamic age. Bacon’s awareness that there was a time of certain knowledge in the prelapsarian world, and that the current epistemic decay was caused by a specific historical fact, allowed him to develop a number of methodological prescriptions to regain the lost learning. In so doing, he tried to design an as-yet untested path. As I have suggested elsewhere,¹¹¹ however, this theoretical optimism is at odds with Bacon’s practice of scientific research as it was performed in his natural histories, which inclined him towards a more pessimistic view, and to a probabilistic and hypothetic science. In Bacon’s writings, there is in fact a tension between what he claims in *theory* about the ways to challenge the sceptical acatalepsia, and what he admits to achieve in *practice* when doing science.

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¹¹¹ Manzo (2009).

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